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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest focuses on educational policy analysis at the local school district level. The digest suggests how school boards can use policy analysis as a tool for policy formation and implementation. Several aspects of school district policy analysis are covered in question-and-answer format: (1) Which role of the policy analyst is most useful to policymakers? (2) Is policy analysis being done at the local level; (3) How may policy analysis help the board identify issues? (4) How can a policy analyst assist in formulating policies? and (5) Is the policy analyst's mission complete once policy has been formulated? Appended are 10 references. (SI)

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In the most general sense the term *policy* has been used simply as a label for a field of government activity, such as a nation's "foreign policy." At a slightly deeper level policy may be viewed as an expression of overall intentions, a formal authorization to accomplish a certain task, or even as a specific, ongoing program. From the point of view of policy analysis, the analyst is not concerned simply with the formal policy, nor even with the specific decision or decisions that created it. Rather, the analyst views policy as a process, beginning with an issue or set issues to be resolved and culminating in the formation, implementation, and evaluation of a policy intended to resolve the issue (Lindblom 1968).

This ERIC Digest focuses on educational policy analysis at the local school district level. The Digest suggests how school boards can use policy analysis as a tool for policy formation and implementation.

Which role of the policy analyst is most useful to policy-makers?

Two mutually exclusive roles have been played by the policy analyst: (1) that of the scholar, who, from the sidelines, analyzes the policy-making process (often retrospectively) with the aim of developing a greater general understanding of that process, that is, the "descriptive" policy analyst; and (2) that of the advisor, who, working with a policy-making body, helps clarify the options and advise the body on the many decisions that must be made as it implements a policy, that is, the "prescriptive" policy analyst (Hogwood and Gunn 1984). It is in this latter role that the policy analyst is of greatest use to a policy-maker, such as a local school board.

Is policy analysis being done at the local level?

A review of the literature on policy analysis reveals that federal and state issues receive most of the attention. Murphy and Hallinger (1984) suggest that this may be due to the fact that the issues at these larger levels (for example, school finance, discrimination, teacher salaries and benefits) are more susceptible to the collection of quantifiable data. This is not to say that policy analysis may not occur at the local school district level, but, if it does, very little of it has been reported. Because this ERIC Digest is directed primarily toward local school boards, an effort will be made to choose examples from that context.

How may policy analysis help the board identify issues?

In some cases the issue has already been identified, as in the case of a mandate from a higher authority (for example, legislatively imposed requirements on educating the handicapped). Often, however, the board is interested in attempting to forecast major issues facing the district in coming years. In the latter situation, the policy analyst may be called upon to carry out a needs analysis, a demand forecast, or some other formal analysis of future trends (see, for example, Mecca and Adams 1985).

An additional task of the policy analyst may involve breaking down a larger issue into subissues, which are often more amenable to resolution through the implementation of specific policies. For example, Bolland and Bolland (1980) posit a hypothetical district in which the issue of concern is the growing drug problem in the schools. The analyst would ask whether this larger issue might not be viewed in at least three different ways: (1) how to keep drugs out of schools, (2) how to alert naive and/or ignorant students of the dangers of drugs, and (3) how to make the school environment less alienating to students who seem most prone to the use of drugs as a means of escape. Each subissue may invite a radically different sort of policy for its resolution.

How can a policy analyst assist in formulating policies?

As an objective observer, the policy analyst may consider options not obvious to the more partisan players in the process. Again referring to the "drug problem" example (Bolland and Bolland 1980), public discussion of the issue may have become polarized to the extent that only "law and order" options have been suggested: suspension/expulsion of offending students, placement of law officers in the schools, locker searches, and so forth. The analyst might suggest a wider range of options that, in addition to the above, could include teacher inservice

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programs on drug abuse, an assembly series on drugs, or the development of a peer counselling program.

The school board's limited resources mean that not all options for resolving an issue can be adopted. In addition, some options may be in conflict with each other, with other school policies, or with state or federal law. (For example, locker searches have been found illegal in some states.) The role of the policy analyst is to identify all such potential conflicts and to provide a comparison of options along lines that are of particular concern to the school board: relative costs, impact on the public, acceptance by key participants, and, ultimately, the potential for resolving the issue. This stage involves the most "guesswork" for the analyst, since it entails projections into the future for each option, or set of options. Some tools that a policy analyst may rely on here include cost-benefit analysis, decision analysis, program analysis and review (PAR), and other types of futures analysis (see, for example, Pogrow 1983).

Is the policy analyst's mission complete, once policy has been formulated?

If the analyst's role is to help develop an optimal policy response to an issue, his or her job is not complete without an examination of that policy's implementation. For example, the district may provide inservice workshops on drug abuse to health science teachers, but no subsequent curriculum on drug education is incorporated into the health science coursework. In this case the policy itself has been improperly implemented, and it may fall to the policy analyst to serve as a monitor and call attention to this shortcoming.

On the other hand, the policy may be properly implemented, and yet the outcomes do not meet expectations. Determining the effectiveness of a policy is often seen as the province of the "program evaluator," as opposed to the policy analyst. However, the distinction is a semantic one; the program evaluator is simply a policy analyst who has been introduced belatedly into the process—more as a "Monday morning quarterback." If the policy analyst, acting as evaluator, determines that the actual outcomes do not match, at least to an acceptable degree, the outcomes originally projected, then the evaluation results may be used as a basis for discontinuing the current policy and instigating a new round of policy initiatives in this issue area (Hogwood and Gunn 1984).

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